

The write stuff: The better the brief, the better the result



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The work done by the client services team is the boring stuff, right? Wrong.

If you think that writing the brief is tedious and unsexy, think again. You may not think that it is the most exciting part of the process – that surely is getting down and dirty with the creative work itself? – but a good brief can make the difference between a creative product that is red hot and spot on, and an also ran that has been changed and changed until the original idea is so diluted it is all but invisible.

Which would you prefer – the ability to create something focussed and successful or death by a thousand cuts?

Some designers believe they work better without a brief. We believe the opposite is true. We believe the best way to free designers to be at their most creative is to make sure they understand the parameters in which they are working. We believe that giving them a

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Going through the process of developing designs without concrete direction is wearing and costly for both sides of the client/agency relationship. You need to understand your client's business, commercial objectives, brands, consumers and motivations. A good brief can tell you all that. And more: it will inspire you to produce your very best work. The better the brief, the better the result; a well thought through, clearly expressed brief with a clearly defined goal enables designers to conceive and execute creative solutions that address client needs.

A good brief is not necessarily the longest or most detailed; it is the one that has clarity and focus. Good briefs leave the recipients with a

clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Bad briefs contain contradictory information and objectives. The more misleading the brief, the longer it will take to work out what really needs to be done.

Clients and agencies frequently blame time pressures as the main reason for inadequate briefs, but working without a formal written brief to save time is a false economy that leads to too much reworking and readjusting of work. Ultimately, it takes longer and it costs clients more, which no one wants in this economy.

Sometimes thoughtful and well-researched briefs prove to be the wrong briefs. Once looked at in more detail it becomes obvious that they are trying to address the wrong thing. We've had instances of brands being

included in a range redesign that just don't sit comfortably in the portfolio, where the issue is really one of portfolio architecture not the redesign we were originally briefed to do.

Sometimes things happen because that's the way they've always been done, so that's the way it stays, until an outsider is bold enough to challenge it. For instance, clients often say that they want six potential routes. Why? Three or four routes allow designers to concentrate on giving their very best work rather than casting around for ideas that can stray from the brief.

Being bold enough to challenge the established order is vital, as is having the courage to challenge your brief. You will be doing yourself and your client a service if you analyze, challenge and debate your formal brief and question closely any elements you feel are misguided, wrong or just plain not achievable. Healthy debate leads to a more robust brief, which can only be good for all those involved for all the reasons already discussed.

All briefs should include background issues, audience information, brand positioning, creative stretch, timings, budget and sacred cows.

- Background information – is the brand losing market share? Has the category dynamic changed? Has the market changed? What is the brand's history and heritage? How has the brand's design evolved over time?
- Audience demographics and insight – we need to know for whom we are designing.

Pen portraits are very helpful because knowing what other brands the target consumers buy can inform the early stages of concept work, and, at the latter stages, you can look back and assess designs against existing purchases.

- Proposition and positioning – it is vital to understand what the brand offer is and what the client wants the brand to stand for. How does it want consumers to view the product offer and what does it want their takeout to be?
- Creative stretch – explain the degree of stretch within the brief. How far along the scale of evolution to revolution is the client willing and able to go?
- Timelines – understanding your client's long term ambitions for the brand or brand portfolio is as important as knowing how quickly a new look needs to be on shelf. As is knowing the commercial imperatives and the retail trade's expectations.
- Budget – don't be afraid to challenge the amount of money allotted to a project, particularly if the client has asked for a lot of routes across a large number of executions.
- Sacred cows – what must and must not change; colour, logo, positioning and anything else the brand is wedded to or violently against.

Once the brief is agreed and you've written a distillation in the form of a creative brief to

inspire your designers, it should be sent to the client for approval before it goes into the design studio and planning department. It is vital that your client agrees with the interpretations it contains.

During the immersion stage, when you are really getting under the skin of the brand, questions of a technical nature are likely to occur. It is vital that designers know and understand the technical helps limitations. At the end of immersion check that the brief is still right and that none of the elements in it has changed..

Things do change. S#!t happens. Commercial considerations change, the scope of the brief alters and sometimes it becomes apparent during the course of a project that other brands in the portfolio need attention. The environment changes and projects get put on hold or need to be rushed through. All good design agencies live in the real world and are prepared for such eventualities. We recap at the end of each stage to make sure that we are on track, on time and on budget.

And the brief again becomes a valuable tool in the middle and at the end of the design process, when it comes to evaluating work in progress and when it is complete. A good brief helps designers all through the process, from start to finish. It enables them to be both highly creative and highly effective, which is what everyone wants.